

# A practical guide to corruption in Central America

by John McAfee

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An event occurred yesterday that motivated me to finish up a small essay that I've been piddling around with. The essay is mostly boring and I highly recommend that, if you have a life, as most do, you simply move on the next file. The event itself, I am simply compelled to lay out for you:

Three months ago a couple of thugs robbed the Wings Superstore in San Pedro (Belize) and made off with a fair amount of cash, a few pounds of jewelry and a lot of Chinese manufactured Gucci bags, Cartier watches and Hermes scarves. And a \$6,000 commercial nightclub sound system. Not much interested me beyond the sound system. That's because it ended up in someone's house in Tower Hill – a tiny village a quarter of a mile downstream from me.

For the past three months, said sound system has been blasting 4,000 watts of bad Lebanese techno music from 5:00 P.M. until 2 or three A.M. Lebanese because the iPod that was attached to the system when it was stolen was primed by the store's owners – fine, upstanding Lebanese gentlemen.

After three months, it occurred to me that if I heard one more minute of a poorly played Rebab, I would come unglued and cause some mischief that I might come to regret. So I visited the owner of said sound system to negotiate a truce and was summarily expelled by said owner and his brandished firearm. Seems the man is feared by everyone in the village and is an all round unpleasant person. He also is the father of one of my most favorite employees, which complicated things. So I called Pazozo – the owner of one of the local brothels and the subject of one of my prior essays here on the Pile. I believed somehow that, as a long time, well known and well respected citizen, he could arrange for me to talk to the offending party in some neutral environment, with a mediator present if necessary.

Pozozo, good friend that he is, came to visit, listened to my story and then said: "I've got you covered". He called a close friend of his.

The gentleman he called was Sergeant Serano the second in command in the Orange Walk Police Force and a well known member of the Zeta drug cartel's Belizean Protection Unit – a group of unpleasant people responsible for the safe transport of certain Columbian drugs through Belize and into Mexico.

His hobby of making Zeta rivals almost disappear (it would be "completely" disappear but for his habit of leaving his victims hands behind as a calling card), has caused him to be unpopular as a companion for most folks here in Northern Belize. Paz is a rare exception. I asked Paz once why the hands were left in the victim's front yard, car, office or bedroom. "It's more scary than a head" he replied.

"Why are you calling him?" I said, slightly alarmed.

"Don't worry". Said Paz. "He's a nice man. You'll like him. He'll take care of you".



To make a long story short, Sgt. Serano was soon sitting in my small living area with the red box featured above happily nestled in his gentle hands. Paz had tutored me many times in the subtle art of "gifting" useful people, and the Sergeant was well impressed at my acumen:



I must say that I took an instant liking to the man. His smile was infectious and his eyes alive and dancing.

"You want to make him go away." He stated with an indescribably sweet smile.

"No" I replied, becoming slightly more alarmed. "His son works for me. I just want to talk to him."

Sgt. Serano's smile faded somewhat at these words and for the first time I saw a hint of a less affable person underneath his exuberant exterior.

"The boy won't know." He said hopefully, in a voice designed to calm my concerns.

"Yes, but I just want to talk to him"

He pondered this for an uncomfortably long while, clearly trying to grasp some principal foreign to his sensibilities. He finally looked at Paz, who nodded slightly, and then said:

"OK".

And with that he left. And returned in less than 15 minutes with the bewildered sound system owner in tow.



Sgt. Serano was not the mediator I had had in mind, and I was not comforted. I began to regret my inability to groove with poorly played Rebabs and Lebanese techno music, but the Sergeant's smile never wavered and his eyes did sparkle in a way that suggested a slim possibility that things might not unravel into chaos, so I made no protest.

Sgt. Serano was not personally known to our music lover and had not bothered to properly introduce himself to the nice gentleman. After seating the man, he began, with an enormous smile, to explain the problem to our new friend. The man listened attentively for a moment.

And then I attempted to chime in with some friendly, hospitable patter, in order to gain control of the conversation and begin the friendly process of compromise. Sgt. Serano silenced me with a wave of his hand, and then he introduced himself.

The man was clearly moved by this revelation.

The Sergeant then began a beautifully phrased and articulate account of his intentions regarding certain events that he would insist that the man witness – involving the man's family mostly, and much use of unwieldy implements, and, of course, things you can do with hands that the average person seldom considers all delivered with the sweetest smile and kindest intonations that I have had the pleasure to experience. He then outlined the likely fate of the man himself, which involved parts of the man's anatomy that I am too shy to repeat, and more implements of a fascinating nature and utility.

Halfway through this beautifully crafted account, the man was so overwhelmed by the story segment – about his daughter's future, if I remember correctly that tears welled into his eyes:



I myself was breathless and hanging on the Sergeant's every word. I surreptitiously (I thought) took a photo of this poignant moment and I wanted desperately to continue photographing for posterity but after a chilling stare from the Sergeant, I feared that any further movement whatsoever, beyond a shallow breathing, might unleash the true Sergeant Serano straining

beneath the fragile mask – and that I might be used as a visual aid in some demonstration expounding what might happen to our nice new friend.

The Sergeant let all this sink in for a moment and then with an inexplicable and sudden shift from a sweet smile and warm intonation into an unbelievably chilling countenance and a hair raising voice, leaned toward the man and explained that the wisest course of action would be to donate his sound system to myself, and the sooner the better. He suggested than 30 minutes should sufficient for the man to gather up the goods and bring them back. The Sergeant didn't feel inclined to give the man a ride to his home and back.

20 minutes later the man appeared with three friends carrying the sound system, complete with four massive speakers, which he delivered to me:



Now .... what unfolded in the above was NOT my intent. I wanted simply to impress upon the nice man the now obvious self delusion that I was indeed clued into the workings of this country and would like to strike an understanding with a neighbor. I wanted it to be a civilized affair over tea and biscuits. The Sergeant's discourse surprised me as much as it did the nice music lover sitting across from me.

What follows is a work in progress begun many months ago that relates closely to the type of events that unfolded in my living room yesterday. The visual aids are not complete, and it is only the first of three parts, but some few of you may find it interesting in some small way.

### **A Practical Guide To Corruption In The Third World – Part One**

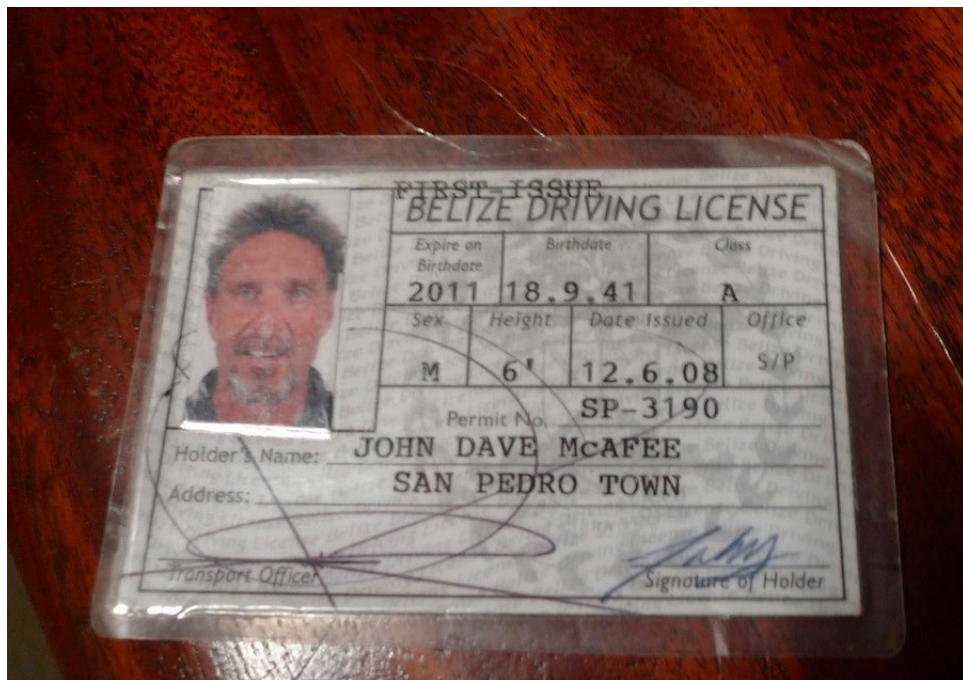
The average tourist in Third World countries seldom comes into contact with the real culture that they are lead to believe they are visiting. You fly into an International airport, are picked up and whisked to a hotel where your comings and goings are regulated by the hotel staff

through activity bookings or the tour or travel companies that take you to allegedly see the "real" country. Even a walk into town on your own reveals little because, if it is a tourist destination, every business, street vendor and beggar in town knows the "tourist" rap. It is a world created and designed exclusively for the tourist trade. Not that you necessarily should escape the tourist confines. It's a comfortable world and provides a fun way to forget work and responsibility for a while. But if you're an adventurer who understands risk and its potential rewards, or if you are planning on residing for any length of time in a Third World country, then this guide is for you.

## Background

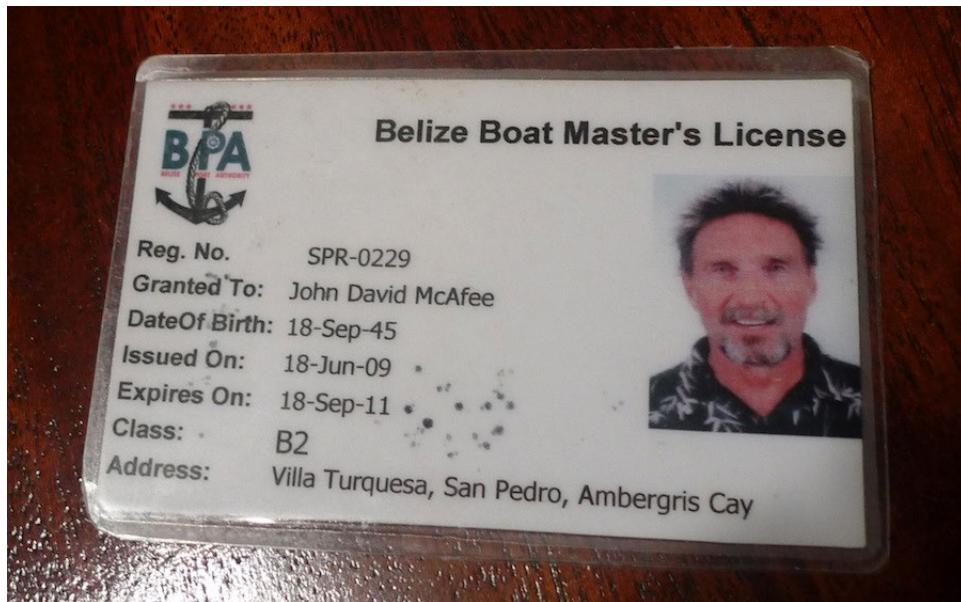
In much of the Third World, the moral framework that governs business, government and personal behavior has little intersection with First World values. Property theft, for example, is barely a crime, and unless you are a person of some importance, the police will take no interest in a reported theft. It's tacitly assumed that if you care about your stuff, then you'll do whatever it takes to hang onto it. If it gets stolen, then it's your fault for not taking proper care, and if you report the theft, you will be considered a fool.

Attitudes toward the function of government display the greatest disparity from First World values. Third World governments function on alien principles. As an example: In Belize, Traffic Department employees, as with most government employees that have any bureaucratic power, are paid substantially less than non government employees not remotely enough to live on. It is understood by everyone that they must augment their pitiful salaries by using their government position. Few people ever take a driver's test or apply for a driver's license. They buy their license from a Traffic Department employee. It is a good thing to have:



A license is convenient identification and offers access to jobs that require licensed drivers. Nearly everyone has one. The law, of course, demands that a written and practical test be taken and passed, but doing so requires access to a car for the test and a fair amount of studying time, neither of which are readily available in a country where most people work 10 hours a day, six to seven days a week, for an average of \$18 a day. Buying a driver's license from someone who works at the traffic bureau is the avenue of choice for most of the cognoscenti. It costs anywhere from \$5 to \$50, depending on your means, and most traffic department employees will include delivery in the price. All you need do is provide them a photograph of yourself. Everyone understands the system and is content with it, from the director of the agency, who receives a percentage of the take, on down to the happy person who receives the license. Even the central government is happy, since \$3 out of each back door transaction has to be applied to the official government licensing fee, and far more people get licenses by buying them than ever would if everyone had to pass the test – particularly considering than 80% of the population is illiterate and incapable of even taking the test. From an economic standpoint, everyone wins. The licensee does not have to miss work, find a car to use for the test or waste productive time studying something he will soon forget. The Traffic Department employees get to make a living wage. The government cuts costs by paying almost nothing for employees, and increases revenues through a system that expands the customer base. No one considers the system to be immoral or corrupt. It is immoral, however, to go down to the traffic office, demand that someone get up from their chair and sit in a car with you where they are forced to give you a test – for which you pay them nothing, other than the \$3 license fee which they cannot keep. Such people are considered cheats – attempting to get a license for next to nothing while cheating the employee out of their rightful due. They also, oddly, seldom pass the driving test.

This same scenario holds for boat captain's licenses, building permits, import permits and every other permit or licensing process controlled by any branch of the government.



My boat master's license cost a full \$100, since I requested a commercial rating (B2) that permits me to carry up to 100 paying passengers at a time. I considered getting a C1 rating (\$1,000), which would have permitted me to pilot an oil tanker or a cruise ship through Belizean waters if I so chose, but it seemed excessive and bit flashy.

The single exception to all of this is pilot's licenses for commercial aircraft. You actually have to know how to fly to get a commercial license. It's sounds odd to me to have exceptions to a near perfect system, but then, much of life is inexplicable to my mind.

The downside to this system is that the death rate, for example, from traffic accidents in Belize is enormous. It makes driving an adventure. I, personally, am fine with it because it keeps my wits sharp whenever I get behind the wheel. The Belizeans, not being stupid people, understand the risks of their system and still prefer it to the alternative.

The human element of this system is highly valued by the populace. A person known to be very poor might only be charged the \$3 government required license fee with the employee getting nothing from the transaction. The clerks who print the licenses don't want to be seen as uncaring and will work out whatever payments seem reasonable for disadvantaged licensees. A known wealthy person, on the other hand, will unquestionably be charged the top rate of \$50, as will any foreigner (all of them are perceived to have money). This holds true across the board, whether dealing with the police at a checkpoint, the Building Department, or a Cabinet Minister. This is unfortunate for the average Gringo, but even in the top tier of prices, what you get for the money is usually a bargain.

In the world of business there is only one moral imperative *caveat emptor* let the buyer beware. If you are cheated in business, then the moral attitude suggests that you shouldn't be

in business, or that you need to get smarter. There is virtually no enforcement of contract law and business fraud of any kind is seldom prosecuted. As with the attitude toward theft, it's up to you to avoid being cheated. Business people who are defrauded are considered fools, and few such people, in order to avoid widespread contempt, will ever divulge their misfortune.

So, with the understanding that you might be in a world that operates on alien values when you travel, let's continue.

## **The Lay of the Land**

Anyone who has traveled through Mexico or any part of Central America by car will be familiar with the Federale checkpoints stationed strategically distant from towns or villages. They are ostensibly there to restrict drug trafficking or prevent other crimes, but the soldiers, really, could care less. They themselves smoke the dope and bump the coke that they confiscate, and have far better things to do than uphold the law by standing in sweltering heat and sun for ten hours when they could be napping back at the station. They are there because they have families to support and have to make an honest buck. A cold coke or beer plus ten pesos is usually enough to get waved through, but an incorrect attitude or a false step will invariably result in an unpleasant day for the traveler. A wise traveler familiarizes themselves with the checkpoint protocols and adheres to them.

Likewise, if you have ever lost a wallet, or been robbed or otherwise abused in Central America and go to the police for help, you will be familiar with the blank expressions or bizarre double talk with which you are greeted. The Police, from their perspective, are dumbfounded that someone disturbed them without proper "documentation". In Belize, the proper documentation is a Blue Note - the nicely blue colored \$100 bill. This will get quick results, if only in the form of arresting a random Rasta dude if no other real help can be given. Frequently, though, the results are quick and efficient. The Police know all the thieves and their habits by name and type, and, motivated by the documentation, will do their best. It wouldn't do, after all, to get the reputation of accepting documentation and not delivering. It would be seen as rude and dishonest.

Or maybe you've had to wait in line for a travel permit, passport stamp, or other mindless formality while dozens of people behind you, or lounging to the side are called in ahead of you. You are acknowledged only after waiting a few hours and making a scene. It's because when you signed in you forgot to pay the "sign in fee" to the bored looking attendant at the front desk.

There are hundreds of such examples that can make traveling in the Third World less enjoyable than it needs to be.

In order to make the most of your travels, you need to first understand that, throughout much of the Third World, there is a smoothly functioning "system" in place that has evolved over

centuries. From the First World perspective it is a "corrupt" system, but that's not a helpful word if you want to acquire the most effective attitude for dancing with it. I prefer "negotiable". It focuses the mind on the true task at hand when dealing with officialdom and removes any unpleasant subconscious connotations. So if you can view the following tools and tips as negotiation guidelines it will help bring the necessary smile to your face when the situation requires one.

## Press Credentials

The most powerful tool a traveler can possess is a Press card. It will allow you to completely bypass the "documentation" process if you have limited time or limited funds and don't want to deal with it. I have dozens stashed in all my vehicles, in my wallet, in my pockets, in my boats:



I am paranoid about being caught without one when I need one. They have magical properties if the correct incantations are spoken while producing them. A sample incantation at a police checkpoint:

(Spoken before the officer has a chance to say anything) "Hi, I'm really glad to see you." (produce the press card at this point). I'm doing a story on Police corruption in Belize and I would love to get a statement from an honest police officer for the story. It's for a newspaper in the U.S. Would you be willing to go on record for the piece?" You can add or subtract magic words according to the situation. Don't worry about having to actually interview the officer. No sane police person would talk to a reporter about perceived corruption while at the task of being perceived to be corrupt. He will politely decline and quickly wave you through. If you do find the rare idiot officer who wants to talk, ask a few pointed questions about his superiors and it will quickly awaken his sensibilities. He will send you on your way.

The press card is powerful, but has risks and limitations. Do not attempt this magic, for example, at a Federale checkpoint on a desolate road late at night. You will merely create additional, and unpleasant work for the person assigned to dig the hole where they intend to place you.

## Documentation

The real art of producing documentation is the subtle play of how much to produce. In Belize, a Policeman makes less than a dollar an hour. At a checkpoint, a policeman will share his proceeds with the other officers lounging by the side of the road and with the police Chief. The Chief will get about 25%, so if there are three officers total, then a ten dollar contribution will end up with about \$2.50 in each person's pocket a good take for someone making about a dollar an hour in legitimate salary.



Nothing irks locals more than someone who produces documentation in excess of what is expected. It ruins the system for the rest of us. The Police begin to expect more from everyone, and the populace is then burdened beyond any sense of reasonableness. I might mention that checkpoints for any given location are set up no more than once a week, and frequent travelers reach accommodations with the authorities so that they are not unnecessarily burdened to the point that they are single handedly putting the policeman's children through school. The police are, by and large, honest people with hearts, and few truly abuse the system.

So to give more than is reasonable is a crime against humanity. The following are some hard and fast formulas that I have learned from trial and error over the years:

Documentation is inversely proportional to traffic density – the higher the traffic, the less you pay, the lower the traffic the more you pay. This is simple economics: The police must make their personal quota from whatever traffic there is.

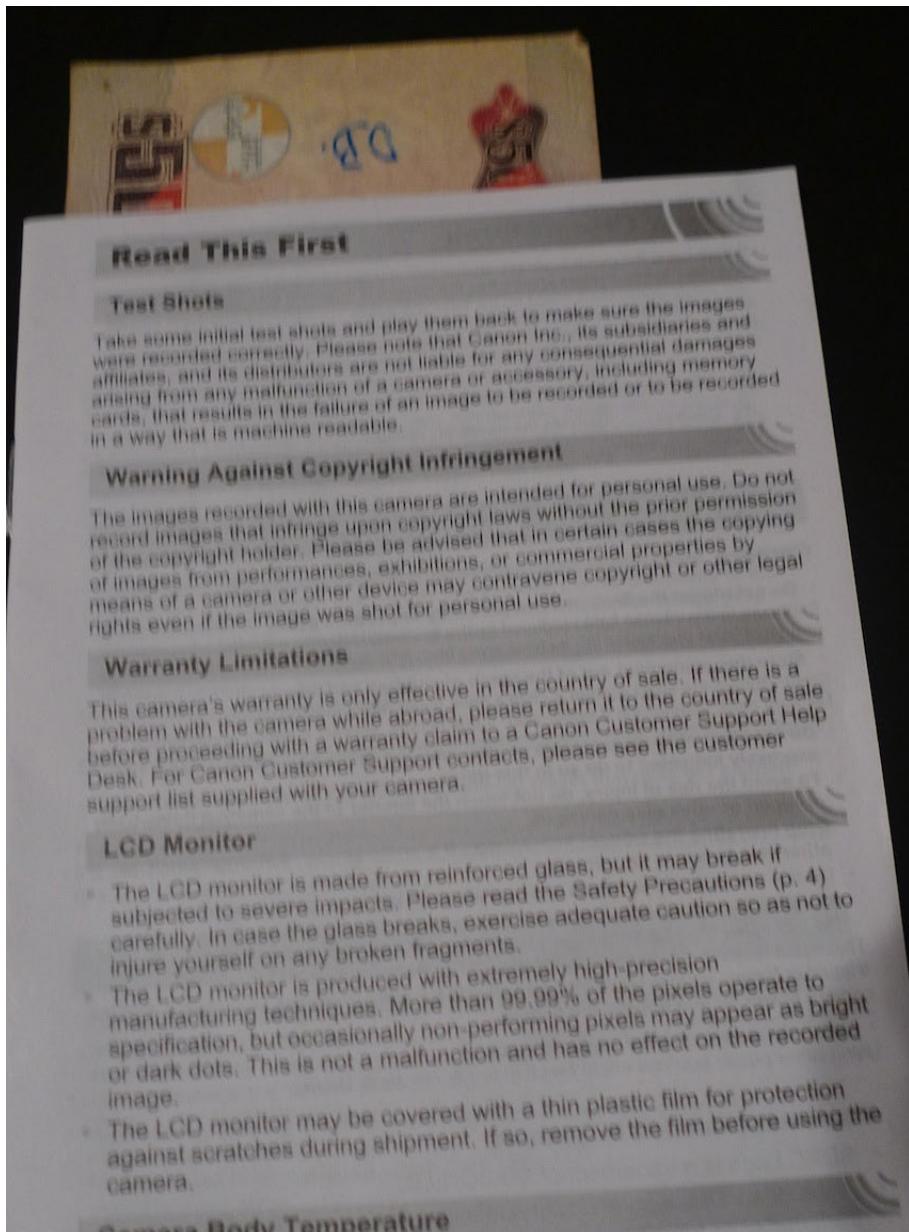
If you stop at a checkpoint and there are four or five cars in line, you can be assured that less than a couple of dollars will be expected from a Gringo. I carry half a dozen cold cokes and beers in a cooler in the backseat and simply reach around, grab one or the other and hand it out the window with a smile. In the late afternoon on a hot day, this will be received with far more appreciation than a few small coins. If you hand a cold drink to all of the officers, you could easily talk them into giving you a protective escort to the next town.

In low traffic areas, in addition to having to pay more, you will also entail more risk. It's never good to travel lonely roads in Central America, unless you are very experienced or closely wired in to the authorities. However, if you've come down to do a dope score or are determined to visit sweet Crucita in some remote village and have no other choice, then strictly adhere to the following:

Do not get out of the car, even if ordered to do so. Your car is your only avenue of escape. It's a ton or more of steel capable of doing serious harm to anyone foolish enough to stand in front of it, and once underway is difficult to stop. The police here never chase anyone down, in spite of years of watching U.S. Television and action movies. It's too much work, plus they could have an accident. It's not worth it for an unknown quantity. And they won't shoot, unless you've run over one of them while driving off. It makes noise and wastes a round that they must account for when they return to the station – creating potential problems with the higher ups. Not that I recommend running. It's just that outside of the car you have lost the only advantage you have.

Smile and, if possible, joke. Say something like: "I'd like to stay and chat but I'm in a hurry to meet a girl. Her husband will be back soon." This will go a long way toward communion with the officers and will elicit a shared experience type of sympathy.

Don't wait for them to talk. Take the initiative. Have your documentation ready as you pull up and simply present it to the nice policeman while beginning your patter similar to the above, or whatever patter is comfortable for you. Never hand cash directly. Slip it in inside your insurance papers, or some other paperwork relating to your car or your journey, with about an inch of the banknote discretely sticking out. I use a Cannon Ixus 530 setup manual with the front and back cover removed. It's small, light, and looks like it could be important paperwork for almost anything.



Remember: 80% of the police who stop you can't read. This is a powerful piece of information for the wise.

Once the officer has removed the banknote, which will be immediate, reach out and retrieve your laptop manual (or whatever you choose to use), smile, wave and drive off immediately without asking permission, but slowly, without looking back. Doing the job and leaving quickly without appearing to hurry off is the key here. Don't give them enough time to assess you.

The above is a failsafe formula for back roads if adhered to explicitly. Expect to part with at least 20 bucks. If, on approaching the checkpoint, you judge the police body language to be insolent or agitated, change the twenty for a fifty.

If something goes awry and the above, for some reason, has not worked, then pretend stupidity. Ask them to repeat everything they say and act bewildered. If ordered to get out of the car, smile broadly and simply drive off. Again slowly.

If drugs or other contraband are planted in your vehicle by one of the police while another has your attention (a very common occurrence), understand, above all, that there is a zero probability that you will be arrested, unless you add to the "offense" by pissing someone off or otherwise acting unwisely. The intent is to scare. Under no circumstances deny that it is yours. Say something like "Damn, I thought I left that at home", or "That's the second time I've been caught this week." This will show them that you are a good natured player and will probably negotiate. Denying ownership of the contraband will be seen as confrontational an attitude that brings high risk when dealing with Third World authorities. The "documentation", however, need not be much. They have chosen an approach to making a living that is universally considered by the locals as "not fair play", and they should not be unjustly rewarded for it. Sure, they did go to the effort of distracting you, and someone had to go to the trouble to plant the dope, so they deserve something, but \$5 is the maximum you need to pay. If they ask for more, then you can safely become indignant. They will shut up. The locals won't tolerate police that take too much unfair advantage of the system, and your obvious awareness of the correct protocols will alert them to potential trouble if they push things.

If you actually are carrying contraband, of any kind drugs, guns, Taiwanese sex slaves whatever, and are caught, then the actions that you take within the first few seconds of discovery will have a profound impact on the rest of your life. The reality is: You have been caught. The officers have options:

1. Arrest you and charge you, where you are likely to confess to other people about exactly what you were carrying and how much thereby limiting the policemen's ability to make off with much of the cache. Or:
2. Come to some arrangement with you that is mutually beneficial and that does not include your demise, or create any undue risks to the officers' jobs or safety.

Option 2 is obviously preferable. To anyone not fond of prisons, that is.

Your first order of business is to assess your situation. If you are in a town or even near one with reasonable traffic driving by, then the chances of your demise, or incurring harm to yourself, are virtually nil if you keep your wits about you. If you are on a lonely country road, and there is only one officer, or even two, your risks could be high, so you will be handicapped in your negotiations.

On your side, you have the option to go to jail and tell your story to lots of people, which generally restricts the officers' abilities to make money on the encounter. The higher ups will take it. On their side, they have the guns, and threats. Ignore the threats. You are fully

cognizant of the fact that their sincere hope is that some accommodation can be reached that enriches their pockets and allows you to leave the area without compromising them.

So first things first. Smile. There is no circumstance under which a smile will handicap you when dealing with authorities.

Be friendly in your speech and immediately and fully acknowledge your situation, and theirs. This puts them at ease and sets the framework for negotiation. Be polite but firm. Let them know that they will not be able to walk off with your entire stash, and do this early on. It creates more reasonable expectations in their minds. If your contraband is drugs, offer them a small hit while talking. It reinforces, subconsciously, the idea that the dope is your possession and that they are partaking due entirely to your good will. If you are transporting sex slaves, then I must say first that I cannot possibly condone your chosen occupation, but offering each one of the policemen a taste of the goods may well seal the deal without any additional cash thrown in.

It's important to be firm without any semblance of hostility. If the policemen tell you, for example, that they are going to confiscate all of the goods, then, with an apologetic manner that implies an unfortunate certainty, say "I'm sorry, but that won't be possible". Shake your head sadly as if you had divulged: "My mom just died". And this is the point to present them with an absurdly low offer. If you are carrying 20 keys of cocaine or a half ton of marijuana, then offer them \$50. Alternatively, you could offer them a one ounce bag of the weed or a gram or so of the coke. If it's sex slaves, tell them they can look at the bare breasts of one of the least attractive women (in parts of Southern Mexico, this might actually be sufficient).

They will be taken aback at your offer, but it will place any unreasonable expectations they may have in stark perspective. As a rule of thumb, if you are near a populated place, you will ultimately settle by parting with an amount of cash equal to about 10% of the wholesale value of the goods. On a road with infrequent and unpredictable traffic, maybe 20%. If you are on a desolate road, especially if the body language is not comforting, you may have to bite the bullet, give them the entire wad, plus your car, and ask for a ride to the bus station. Don't expect the police to accept the drugs or contraband as payment if you are near a populated area. They would obviously be seen transferring the goods to their vehicles. If you are not carrying sufficient cash, then you are unprepared, and shouldn't be doing shady deals in Central America.

Never display fear or hostility. Smile throughout, and crack what jokes you can.

## **Name Dropping**

Knowing the name of the country's Police Commissioner and Armed Forces Chief, and the Chief of Police for each county or town you will be driving through can be very helpful. Knowing all the mayor's names will not hurt any either. Name dropping is a powerful tool in the Third

World, especially for gringos, if used appropriately. Telling a cop in America that you are friends with the mayor or the police chief will seldom help you avoid a traffic ticket, and may even increase the charges. In Belize, offending the Police Commissioner will immediately get a policeman fired, with no repercussions to the Commissioner, and, depending on the offense, may even get the officer "erased". So it gives an officer serious pause when you say: "The drugs belong to Commissioner Gonzales. I am delivering them to a friend for him". If spoken with authority and condescension, they can have a dramatic effect. No policeman in his right mind would try to validate the story. Resident Gringos, for odd reasons, are prized as friends by wealthy and prominent locals, so it would not be out of the question to be close with the Country's Police Commissioner. If the cop asks any specifics, like, how you know the Commissioner, pull out your cell phone and say: "I have the commissioner's number, why don't we call him and you can ask him yourself." You need to have solid self assurance, or at least some large cojones, to pull this off, but in a tough situation this can work miracles.

A small amount of research is necessary before using this approach. You need to know, for example, whether the police commissioner is really dealing drugs (almost all are). Every local inhabitant in the country will know this information (there are no secrets in the Third World). The policeman will certainly know.

You don't have to be doing something illegal in order to use the name dropping approach. When I first moved to Belize, two policemen stopped me late in the evening while I was driving a golf cart across the bridge to San Pedro's North Island. Before I could provide the proper "documentation" for a bridge checkpoint, one officer harshly demanded my drivers license, which I provided and then shut up. His attitude was not in harmony with a normal checkpoint situation. While he stared at my license, the other dropped a bag of weed on the back floor of the cart. (I don't smoke weed by the way.) When the first officer "discovered" the bag I said: "I hope you won't tell Commissioner Ancona about this. He's a very close friend of mine and I wouldn't want him to think anything bad about me." The first officer divulged that they were only joking by planting the weed. He apologized and waved me through.

Generally, the tactic of planting drugs on people is only practiced in heavily trafficked tourist areas. The police in tourist areas are handicapped because tourists generally don't "pay their due" to the police, or to any other functionary. Tourists consider it "corrupt" to have to pay policeman to do their jobs, or to pay them in order to have the freedom to drive down the street on checkpoint day. The police therefore are forced to resort to unethical means in order to make a living in these places. I understand this well, yet some character flaw in myself won't allow me to reward someone who plants drugs on me. Hence my tactic above.

## **Gifts**

Gifts occupy a different strata in the system of negotiation. They are used when some future consideration is required, or after an official favor has been provided. Gifts can be small or large, depending on the circumstances and the wise person will have an ample supply ready for any event. I operate seven small businesses in Belize so my gifting burden is higher than most:





For example: If you want a building permit, and you live in one of the few parts of the country where such things actually mean something, then, unless you want to wait five or more years, a gift to the superintendent of the building department is required. This is in no way considered wrong. It's merely a requirement of the system. Or if you live in Orange Walk and expect the Fire Department to respond to an emergency call on the same day that it's called in, then a gift to the Fire Chief soon after you move to town is a requirement. Again, not wrong, merely a demand of the system. It would be wrong of me, by the way, to expect the Fire Department to respond to a call if I had not previously gifted the Fire Chief. Gifts of this nature are highly means dependent – that is: people who have little are only expected to give a little. People of means are expected to pony up.



Favors, likewise, are part of the system. They have no negative connotation, and they require gifts whose magnitude reflects the magnitude of the favor. As an example, I personally ran afoul of one of the local police officers in Orange Walk. It's a long and dull story involving a local bartender that I befriended and his girlfriend. I have encountered this officer a number of times since our first encounter and each time I have been unduly harassed. Increased "Documentation", which normally smoothes over any misunderstandings, had not helped our relationship. Finally, I asked an intermediary for an introduction to the Police Chief, to whom I explained my problem. I gifted him a 22 inch LCD TV, and have had nothing but fine rapport with the unreasonable officer ever since. Favors of this nature are neither frowned upon nor are they rare.



One common "favor" that is considered questionable is to gift an officer in the armed forces to provide armed support for a drug deal, a revenge raid, an armored car heist, or any similar function. It's a very common occurrence but it's deemed to be morally sketchy by most of the populace. The reason for this, I believe, is the sense of unease created by the image of highly organized, insolent, largely illiterate men with fully automatic weapons catering to the whims of anyone with spare change. The general consensus is that the system of "negotiation" should stop at the gates of the military. The military should uphold the system, not practice it, as my friend and philosopher Paz once said. This is no more illogical than policemen as "officers of the peace". The fact that SWAT teams exist and every policeman carries a gun and is trained in violent tactics, should alert us to the fact that practicing peace is not the means of choice for maintaining peace.

## **Extra**

How much does this method of doing business costs on average, say, each month?

It's way less than doing business in say, America. First, there are no bookkeeping requirements. Businesses are not required to keep receipts, logs or records of any kind other than a total amount of each category at the end of the year. If you're audited (never happens), a collection of numbers with no dates or explanations is legal sufficiency. The total taxes on business income – national, local, metropolitan, etc., is 1.25%, and that only comes into play for businesses making more than \$75,000 per year. Needless to say, few businesses makes more than \$75,000 per year. The paperwork requirements that plague American and European businesses are also non-existent here. There are no real studies or plans required for

construction or development. No hoops to jump through for getting permits, licenses, etc. No one in this country hires a bookkeeper. The position is an unknown position. If records were kept, then any bureaucrat that you had pissed off could use those records to harass you. There are no safety requirements or work hazard issues to deal with. There are no laws governing hours of work or conditions of work.

I buy cases of 100 watches for \$1,700 twice a year from a dubious fellow in Mexico. Each watch comes with a nice case and an official looking price tag ranging from \$525 to \$1,500. I gave Mr. Serano one of the \$1,500 watches. (He's wearing it in the photo). I purchased 35 notebook computers last year for a total of \$9,000. I purchased 200 folding knives for a cost of \$3,500. I purchased 50 pairs of binoculars for \$1,100. I also purchase 40 flat screen TVs of varying sizes for around \$12,000. That's about it. I get the occasional request from officials that are not in my inventory and I attempt to acquire them if the favor is large enough. If not I gently chide the person about "taking advantage". A few times I have been asked bluntly for sexual favors. Not from myself, but knowing that I am a friend of Paz requesting this or that specific individual. I always say "I'll see what I can do", pass the request on to Paz, and then forget about it. Paz has never billed me so I can only assume it didn't happen. Once I was asked by the Chief Customs Officer in Corozal if he could spend a weekend at my house in San Pedro with his girlfriend. I said yes, but he never showed up.

If you tally it all up, it's not so bad.

I find the whole process to be intriguing, and it offers limitless outlets for creativity. When I first moved here, I sent a 42 inch plasma TV to the Chief Customs Officer at the International Airport, with a note saying simply: "Thank you for all of your help. John McAfee". I included my phone number. I had never met the man and he had done nothing for me. He called me shortly after it was delivered and said "Are you sure you have the right person?"

"I hope so" I said.

After a brief pause, he said "Ahhhhh".

The following month I unaccountably was only charged \$400 customs duty on a \$300,000 shipment of goods. I never once called him between the time of the delivery of the TV and the arrival of the goods, and never once asked for a favor.



**The vial contains C-12 acyl homoserine lactone.  
It is the molecule that signals Pseudomonas, and other bacteria, to express  
the protease gene. Protease is what dissolves muscles and other tissues.**

**It was produced in a cheap bioreactor in a tiny lab in a third world country**

**If a direct delivery mechanism existed, the contents of this vial would kill  
200,000 people.**

**Or it could save the world's oceans, provide food for millions or  
generate electricity**

**Which options do you think the world's militaries are scrutinizing?**